The role of tenant farmers and women in irrigation management: reflection from Mithilanchal

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Introduction

- Critical constraints to sustainable intensification of agriculture in the lowland Koshi basin which are both agro-ecological and political-economic
- This presentation considers pioneering new models to engage with marginal and tenant farmers, particularly women led households.
Evolution of the social formation in Mithilanchal

• Contemporary inequalities rooted in the centralised feudal state formations of the medieval and colonial period (Darbhanga Raj; Rana regime; Zamindari system)

• Post 1960s land reforms failure to address structural inequality
Contemporary agrarian structure

• Marginal and tenant farmers
  – Tenants, marginal farmers (less than 0.5ha), and landless labourers, form at least 75% of the rural population, and constitute base of agrarian structure.
  – Mostly Dalit and Mahadalit in caste heartland, and adivasi in the northern Tarai

• Large farmers and landlords
  – At the apex, is a local landlord class in the Maithili caste heartland.
  – Powerful landlord class persists in Bihar and Nepal’s Koshi floodplains
  – Smaller landlord class and mostly middle or high caste ‘large farmers’ in central Tarai.
Agrarian structure in 14 village study (2013-15)

INDIA (Bihar)

NEPAL Tarai (ADIVASI)

NEPAL Tarai (MADHESHI)

Madhubani
Purnea
Sunsari
Morang
Dhanusha

- landless labourer
- tenant
- part tenant
- landowner <0.5ha
- landowner 0.5-1ha
- landowner 1-2ha
Outcomes of landlord-tenant relations in Mithilanchal

• Insecure tenancy (frequent change of tenants)
• Poor economies of scale for irrigation due to fragmentation
• High rent (sharecropping predominant) make investments unfeasible
• Absentee landlordism significant barrier for irrigation investment.
Contemporary agrarian stress

• Climate change:
• Rising cash demands
  – Increasing costs of agricultural inputs
  – Increased monetisation of the economy, rising demand for cash, inflated dowry demands.
• Combined with persisting inequalities, capacity for invest is very limited amongst the marginal and tenant farming majority.
Migration and feminisation of agriculture

- Out-migration essential for marginal and tenant households to meet their subsistence needs
- Women who stay behind to manage the land face further constraints in accessing irrigation
  - Gendered barriers in groundwater markets
  - Sporadic remittances and loss of daily wage labour income.
  - High work burden and challenges of labour management
- High vulnerability to climate stress
Solution through agricultural collectives

- Collective leasing of land for groups of tenants who pool labour and capital
- Sharing or labour, costs and profits
- Joint ownership and management of equipment (borewells, pump sets, threshers, zero till machinery etc)
- Feasible so long as collectives remain (i) participatory, (ii) small in size and (iii) homogeneous
Operation of a contiguous plot
Labour management
Potential for shared investments and management of equipment
Knowledge pooling
Innovation from the grassroots up
Utilisation of fallow land
• Landlord discussion

Improved bargaining power with landlords
Remaining questions

1. Whether to pool only land and capital and not labour
2. How to ensure landlords do not take back the land
3. Energy questions and sustainable technology
Thank you